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ABSTRACT

This paper describes ethical considerations in the use of strategic ambiguity in organizational communication. Ambiguity is defined as "experienced ambiguity" and is distinct from uncertainty and equivocality which are properties of a stimulus. Strategic ambiguity is the use of "calculated ambiguity" in organizations to achieve objectives. Analysis of field data gathered in a division of a Fortune 100 company supports the proposition that teleological assumptions often underlie the use of strategic ambiguity in organizations. Classroom experience with the use of strategic ambiguity suggests that the use of strategic ambiguity in a deontological framework requires that senders' intentions, the effect of the message on receivers, and alternative communication strategies all be considered. In conclusion, strategic ambiguity is a valuable communication strategy in organizations that requires explicit consideration of ethics when used in a deontological framework. As future research on communications in organizational environments improves understanding of ambiguity, the information should be used in the classroom. (Contains 17 references.) (RS)

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The ethics of strategic ambiguity:

Contrasting teleologically and deontologically based experiences

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The ethics of strategic ambiguity:

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Abstract

This paper describes ethical considerations in the use of strategic ambiguity in organizational communication. Ambiguity is defined as "experienced ambiguity" and is distinct from uncertainty and equivocality which are properties of a stimulus. Strategic ambiguity is the use of "calculated ambiguity" in organizations to achieve objectives. Analysis of field data supports the proposition that teleological assumptions often underlie the use of strategic ambiguity in organizations. Our experience with the use of strategic ambiguity in the classroom suggests that the use of strategic ambiguity in a deontological framework requires that senders' intentions, the effect of the message on receivers, and alternative communication strategies all be considered. The authors conclude that strategic ambiguity is a valuable communication strategy in organizations which requires explicit consideration of ethics when used in a deontological framework.

The ethics of strategic ambiguity:

Contrasting Teleologically and Deontologically Based Experiences

It is widely recognized that communication within organizations can be unclear and ambiguous. Unintended and strategic uses of ambiguity are prevalent in organizations. While clarity is often considered desirable in communication, ambiguous communications may actually be more effective in certain circumstances. Eisenberg (1984, p. 230) has noted that, "...clarity is only a measure of communicative competence if the individual has as his or her goal to be clear."

Ethical issues are rarely explicated in regard to ambiguous communications. Clampitt (1991) has astutely addressed the issue that the vagueness inherent in language can be used for either ethical or unethical purposes. Since intentionally ambiguous communications take advantage of the equivocal nature of language, explicit consideration of communication ethics is important when discussing ambiguity in organizational communication.

Ambiguity

Stohl and Redding (1987, p. 483) state that "...the concept of ambiguity is itself ambiguous." In an effort to clarify the concept, they define "experienced ambiguity" (p. 484) as the perceptions of the individuals who receive communications. They make a distinction between Type 1 and Type 2 experienced ambiguity:

> *Type 1 ambiguity*: a receiver's mental state of doubt, confusion, or uncertainty, resulting either from (a) inability to select a single interpretation from two or more plausible options--that is, multiple interpretations are perceived; or (b) inability to construct any plausible interpretation whatever--that is, the message is perceived as "meaningless" in a particular context.

> *Type 2 ambiguity*: a receiver's mental state of clarity, free from serious doubt or uncertainty, regarding his or her single interpretation; however, this interpretation differs from the sender's intended meaning, and it may differ from the interpretations created by other receivers. (Stohl & Redding, 1987, pp. 484-485)

This definition is helpful in distinguishing between ambiguous, uncertain and equivocal communications. We view ambiguity as "experienced ambiguity" and define it in terms of the perceptions of the receiver. In contrast, we define uncertainty as a property of the message relating to "information adequacy" rather than as a perceptual process (Gifford, Bobbitt, & Slocum, 1979, p. 460). We view equivocality as a property of a stimulus which contains multiple significations that must be incorporated to result in an adequate understanding of the stimuli (Weick, 1969). Using these definitions, it is equivocal or uncertain stimuli which may result in experienced ambiguity on the part of the receiver. In the remainder of this article we focus on experienced ambiguity and exclude further consideration of uncertainty and equivocality.

"Calculated ambiguity" (Stohl & Redding, 1987, p. 488) refers to communications composed and sent with the intention that they will be experienced as ambiguous by receivers. Eisenberg (1984, p. 230) uses "strategic ambiguity" to refer to "...those instances where individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals." For our purposes, we use the term strategic ambiguity to refer to the use of calculated ambiguity in organizations. This conceptualization of strategic ambiguity differs from Eisenberg's original definition since it refers to the sender's intention to create an experience of ambiguity on the part of the receiver.

Strategic Ambiguity

The use of strategic ambiguity can be a valuable approach to communication. Eisenberg

(1984) states that strategic ambiguity can be used to promote a unified diversity, facilitate organizational change, and preserve existing positions. Organizational missions and goals are often intentionally ambiguous since "ambiguous missions and goals allow divergent interpretations to coexist and are more effective in allowing diverse groups to work together" (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987, p. 422). Organizational values may be expressed at "...levels of abstraction at which agreement *can* occur" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). Strategically ambiguous strategies allow for "...agreement in the abstract and the preservation of diverse viewpoints" (p. 232).

Strategic ambiguity can also be used to enhance a sender's credibility with receivers. In the absence of a clear disconfirming message, a receiver will "...attach a meaning that is congruent with his attitudes, thus assimilating the message" (Goss & Williams, 1973, p. 166). Williams and Goss (1975, p. 265) describe this use of intentional ambiguity as "a kind of character insurance for people who are perceived as credible."

Intentionally ambiguous communications also have the property of being deniable (Eisenberg, 1984). This deniability is especially useful in preserving future options (Eisenberg, 1984), allowing people to save face, delaying conflict, testing reactions to ideas, and avoiding personal responsibility (Clampitt, 1991).

Intentional ambiguity can also be useful in addressing difficult issues, improving interpersonal relations, and resolving conflict. It allows difficult issues to be addressed when "the circumstances seriously limit the probability of successful persuasion" by limiting disagreement and getting people to focus on the more abstract concepts on which they agree instead of specific implementation points upon which they disagree (Williams, 1976, p. 17). Ambiguity provides a mechanism whereby "...various constituencies can claim victory" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 423).

Ethics

There is a fundamental distinction in normative ethics between teleological and deontological theories (Beauchamp, 1991). Teleology can be traced back to Aristotle's *The Nichomachean Ethics*, a system of morality based on purpose (Solomon, 1992). Teleology refers to consequential ethics in which moral principles and behavior are justified as serving some human or divine purpose. The most influential teleological theory, utilitarianism, originated with Hume's *Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* and was advanced by Jeremy Bentham and later by John Stuart Mill (Solomon, 1992). Utilitarianism judges the rightness or wrongness of actions by weighing the consequences of the actions. Common understandings of utilitarianism are reflected in the statements, "the ends justifies the means" and "we ought to promote the greatest good for the greatest number."

In stark contrast to teleology, deontology refers to ethical theories in which moral standards exist independently of consequences (Beauchamp, 1991). Immanuel Kant, in his *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, conceives of right action as acting with right intention (i.e., "duty for duty's sake"). Kant proposed the "categorical imperative" through which maxims of action could be tested. In this test, rules of action must be universalizable, i.e., "the maxim must be capable of being conceived and willed without contradiction as a universal law" (Beauchamp & Childress, 1979, p. 34). Universalizability of action implies that every individual is to be treated as an end in themselves and never as a means to a utilitarian end (Frascona, Conry, Ferrera, Lantry, Shaw, Siedel, Spiro, & Wolfe, 1991). Pluralistic rule deontology relaxes the strict Kantian requirement of universalizability and identifies classes of acts which are either right and obligatory, or wrong and prohibited (Beauchamp & Childress, 1979).

Field and Classroom Experiences

We first describe a field study in which critical incidents relating to experienced ambiguity were collected. Our analysis makes the point that messages considered unethical from a deontological perspective may be ethical when considered from a utilitarian, teleological perspective. Next, we describe the use of strategic ambiguity in the classroom by two of the authors. This use of strategic ambiguity was based on deontological assumptions. We will describe our experience and elaborate on problems, concerns, and opportunities for the use of strategic ambiguity in a deontological framework.

Teleological Ethics in Organizations

Eisenberg and Goodall (1993, p. 28) criticize the use of strategic ambiguity for its potential to "minimize the importance of ethics." Their assessment relates to the frequent use of strategic ambiguity by members of organizations in order to "escape blame" (p. 26). This analysis of the risks and common uses of strategic ambiguity seems to imply that a utilitarian ethical perspective has been adopted by members of contemporary organizations. Focusing on the deniability of strategically ambiguous communications appears to emphasize the utility of the communication strategy while ignoring moral values related to means.

To explore this postulate, examples of ambiguous communication were gathered in a division of a Fortune 100 company. This organization (the division) is the management and operating contractor at a Department of Energy site. Examples of ambiguous communications were collected by asking managers to provide information about specific incidents in which they were either a witness or were directly involved. We first provide a paraphrased version of each incident and then an analysis supporting the ethics of each ambiguous communication from a teleological perspective (i.e., the organizational utility of each communication).

Incident 1

"Sometimes you make a proposal to another organization and they say, 'We'll study it.' This leaves you uncertain about what, if anything, the other organization is going to do with your proposal."

Analysis.

A statement such as, "We'll study it" allows those receiving proposals flexibility about when and how to respond. They avoid any commitments about how quickly to respond and whether their responses will be favorable or unfavorable. This permits those receiving proposals to respond in ways that protect the interests of the organization.

Incident 2

"Managers in our customer organization often don't clearly communicate what they want. They give vague and contradictory information about the desired end products or services. We call this the 'bring me a rock' approach."

Analysis.

By being less than precise about what they want, managers in the customer organization may receive product and service variations they would not have thought of themselves. In other words, their strategic use of ambiguity may lead to innovation, creativity, and unexpected products and services.

Incident 3

"A senior manager came to our problem-solving meeting. His communication was ambiguous; he talked around the issues." One of the witnesses of this incident was convinced that the senior manager's ambiguous communication was the result of a lack of understanding of the issues being discussed. The witness concluded that the senior manager had used ambiguity to hide

his ignorance.

Analysis.

If the witness is correct, this use of strategic ambiguity could help preserve the manager's ability to lead. Employees typically expect those leading them (e.g., senior managers) to meet high standards of performance. Senior managers who do not have a grasp of fundamental organizational issues would fail to meet these expectations. This could lead to disillusionment with the organization's leadership. Thus, from a teleological perspective, it may be appropriate for senior managers to use strategic ambiguity as a smoke screen for ignorance.

Incident 4

"There's one fairly high-level manager in the customer organization who's notorious for giving conflicting direction. Here's an example. The manager explained what he wanted my group to do. I relayed this to my boss, who said, 'I'd better talk to him and make sure that's what he wants.' After talking with the manager, my boss said, 'He told me something completely different.' What the manager told my boss he wanted was 180 degrees different from what he told me he wanted!"

Analysis.

In this incident, the manager in the customer organization may have been using strategic ambiguity to preserve hierarchical relationships. By providing the boss with the intended direction, the manager in the customer organization made it clear that communication between him and the boss is essential. The lower-level manager who related this incident will have to rely on his boss for accurate direction from the customer. This will help preserve existing positions within the hierarchy, possibly resulting in better organizational performance.

Analyses of the incidents above do not address the negative effects of strategic ambiguity on

the receivers of the communications because, in a teleological framework the impact on the receivers is subordinate to the organizational utility of the communication. We present these incidents as representative examples of the ethical use of strategic ambiguity in organizations. However, Eisenberg and Goodall (1993, p. 26) contend that strategic ambiguity "minimizes the importance of ethics" in the workplace. We disagree and think that they have confused the issue of ethical/unethical with the particular ethical perspective on which members of organizations base their actions. These incidents support our contention that organizational members often base their use of strategic ambiguity on teleological rather than deontological assumptions.

Deontological Ethics in the Classroom

We take the position that the ethical problems discussed by Eisenberg and Goodall (1993) lie not with the strategic use of ambiguity but with the ethical orientation of organizational members who use strategically ambiguous communications. To explore the use of strategic ambiguity based on deontological ethics, we integrated this communication strategy into a college course taught by two of the authors. As co-instructors of this undergraduate management communications course, we used intentionally ambiguous communications to teach students communication skills necessary for success in today's decentralized, participative organizations (O'Reilly, 1983). We limit this discussion to ethical considerations since the course design and outcomes have been detailed elsewhere (Paul & Strbiak,1994).

To guide us in our thinking and actions, we used an adaptation of Redding's (1992) typology of unethical messages. Specifically, we considered any communication that was coercive, destructive, deceptive, intrusive, secretive, or manipulative/exploitative to be unethical. We also incorporated Weick's (1969) ideas on the importance of the triad in organizational behavior. By integrating these concepts we developed a deontological ethics of ambiguous organizational

communication which considers the sender, the receiver and the message. This suggests the following three specific responsibilities for senders of intentionally ambiguous communications:

1. Clarity of the sender's intention.
2. Awareness of possible interpretations and effects on receivers.
3. Consideration of alternative communication strategies.

First, the sender's intentions are of primary interest in determining whether an ambiguous communication is ethical or unethical. Intentions that are coercive, destructive, deceptive, intrusive, secretive, manipulative, or exploitative (Redding, 1991) are clearly unethical from a deontological perspective.

Example

In the course, our intentions were clearly ethical from a deontological perspective. They were:

1. To provide students with an opportunity to learn their responsibilities as active receivers of communications.
2. To provide students with an opportunity to learn tolerance for ambiguity.
3. To provide the flexibility for students to maximize the utility of their classroom experience.

Second, a sender's responsibility lies not only in their intention, but also in the possible interpretations and misinterpretations of the receivers of the communication. Clampitt (1991, p. 278) identifies this responsibility as extending only to "legitimate" interpretations (i.e., the most probable interpretations of the message). If receivers perceive a message as coercive, destructive, deceptive, intrusive, secretive, manipulative, or exploitative (Redding,1991), then the communication is unethical.

Example

We expected that the most probable student response to the strategic ambiguity would be to initiate information-seeking communications to reduce the ambiguity. What actually occurred was that students chose to live with the ambiguity, making their own interpretations without checking them with the instructors. This adversely affected their performance on some written assignments which had clear performance criteria. The students reported that this was very frustrating, but they continued to act as passive receivers of our strategically ambiguous communications.

While our intentions were ethical, our ambiguous communications had destructive effects on the receivers of the communications. Reasoning from a deontological position, even though our intentions were clearly ethical, the effect of our communications on the students resulted in the communication being unethical. We attribute our ethical failure to an inadequate consideration of the possible misinterpretations of our messages. Students' misinterpretations of our ambiguous messages resulted in unexpected actions (in this case a lack of action). We extend Clampitt's (1991) remarks and conclude that for strategic ambiguity to be used ethically in a deontological framework, the senders of ambiguous messages must consider not only legitimate interpretations but must also consider the impact of the most probable misinterpretations of their messages.

Third, alternative communication strategies that minimize the potential for misinterpretation should be considered. While intentionally ambiguous communication is useful and often appropriate, sometimes objectives can be achieved by using alternative methods. Restructuring work groups, changing the technology of work, or modifying the criteria by which work is evaluated are examples of alternatives that might allow the achievement of objectives while keeping the communication clear rather than ambiguous. While ambiguous communication has many potential benefits, it has risks that are more serious than communication characterized by

clarity.

Example

There were alternative communication strategies available which could have been used to achieve our objectives.

1. We could have used a communication strategy of clarity to teach the students about ambiguity.
2. We could have bounded the ambiguity segment of the class so that it would not have resulted in semester-long frustration.
3. We could have created a very ambiguous environment early in the course and reduced it through learning contracts.
4. We could have focused specific assignments on either Type 1 or Type 2 ambiguity, thereby eliminating the frustrating confound that students encountered.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

Our field data provide some support for the notion that members of organizations who use strategic ambiguity frequently base their communication ethics on teleological assumptions. This use of strategic ambiguity appears to have organizational utility and is clearly ethical in organizations that value utilitarianism. More field research needs to be conducted in organizations to document the organizational uses of strategic ambiguity. Additionally, ethical analyses of the organizational uses of strategic ambiguity should be conducted to gain insight into communicators' ethical assumptions.

Our classroom experience demonstrates the difficulty of using strategic ambiguity ethically from a deontological perspective. We encourage laboratory study of strategic ambiguity in order to better understand the subtleties of strategic ambiguity. Specific issues that need to be addressed include: 1) development and validation of manipulations of experienced ambiguity, 2)

development of a reliable and valid scale for the measurement of experienced ambiguity, 3) measurement of the degree to which strategic ambiguity accomplished the intentions of the sender, and 4) measurement of the effect of strategically ambiguous communications on receivers of the communications.

In addition to empirical investigations, we also encourage the elaboration of theory relating to strategic ambiguity and communication ethics. Specifically, the concepts of uncertainty, equivocality and ambiguity need more explicit definition. The ethics of strategic ambiguity need greater elaboration; a more complete deontological analysis of the ethics of strategic ambiguity would contribute to the organizational communication literature. And, the theoretical relationship between strategically ambiguous communication strategies and individual and organizational level performance is critical to our understanding of the appropriate role of strategic ambiguity in organizational communications.

Lastly, we encourage greater integration of ambiguity and ethics in organizational communication and business courses. Ambiguity is a fact of life in organizations today. Students should understand their role as active receivers of communications, especially ambiguous communications. As future research on communications in organizational environments improves our understanding of ambiguity, this information should be used in the classroom. Simulation of ambiguous, participative organizational environments by ambiguous, participative classroom environments should be explored as an experiential instructional method to help students learn the communication skills they need to be successful in contemporary organizations.

Conclusions

We have defined ambiguity as an experience of the receiver of a communication, and strategic ambiguity as the use of calculated ambiguity in an organizational environment to purposefully

accomplish a sender's objectives. We have interpreted data from a field study as descriptive of the use of strategic ambiguity in a teleological ethical framework. Our use of strategic ambiguity in the classroom suggests that the use of strategic ambiguity in a deontological framework requires a consideration of factors which are not considered in a teleological framework. A deontological approach requires that senders' intentions, the effect of the communication on receivers, and alternative communication strategies all be considered.

Eisenberg and Goodall (1993) contend that strategic ambiguity can minimize the importance of ethics in communications. We have attempted to reframe their criticism as reflecting the widespread use of strategic ambiguity based on teleological assumptions, in which the utility to the organization is of primary importance. When the use of strategic ambiguity is based in deontological assumptions, explicit attention to ethics is required. If organizational members can become aware of their ethical assumptions and the effects of their ambiguous communications on others, they will have the choice to use strategic ambiguity in a deontologically ethical manner.

Strategic ambiguity can be a useful communication strategy in organizations. But the use of strategic ambiguity based on teleological assumptions has caused problems for many organizational members. The use of strategically ambiguous communication strategies based on deontological ethics should help managers accomplish their objectives while contributing to the development of organizational environments based on trust and mutual respect.

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